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Autobiographical Reflections Part II: Risk, Tenacity and Philosophies of Research

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper reviews autobiographical accounts of thought leadership in the marketing discipline and draws out pertinent insights for senior, mid-career and junior academics alike.

Design/methodology/approach: This narrative is based on a close reading of the pertinent material.

Findings: To be a pioneer in marketing takes considerable hard work, tenacity, serendipity, and a high tolerance for risk.

Originality/value: This manuscript can be used by junior scholars to legitimize the challenges they pose to more established colleagues. It helps contribute to the reversal of extant power relations in academic practice.

Paper type: Viewpoint

Keywords: Marketing; autobiography; research philosophy; power relations

Introduction

This is the second issue of the *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* dedicated to highlighting the contributions of important scholars in our discipline. They have shaped their respective topical areas in substantive ways. And we are fortunate to have received work from Valarie Zeithaml, Ruth Bolton, Christian Grönroos, Robin Wensley, and Roger Layton. Their scholarly orientations run all the way from services marketing (Zeithaml, Grönroos, Bolton) via largely managerial marketing (Wensley) through to macromarketing (Layton). We do not intend to review each paper in turn. Rather, we focus on the shared factors that have been impactful in helping these academics achieve the career success they have enjoyed.

Since we discussed it in our previous editorial (Tadajewski and Jones, 2017), we will not belabour a key theme that presents itself very clearly across these reflections, namely, the importance ascribed to hard work; hard work, in turn, often leads to serendipity – a major theme in Bolton's autobiography. Bolton and Zeithaml, for example, both underscore parental guidance as formative influences in their lives. They pay attention to the pressures they were under to earn self-generated income from an early age. Indeed, looking back on her life, one of her first jobs (as a life-guard) encouraged Zeithaml to introspectively reflect upon the service required from this role. This, of course, necessitated considering the expectations of her customers and other stakeholders. She credits this teenage experience and the rumination it fostered with being the genealogical origin of ideas about service performance and expectation gaps.

As we might expect, there are a number of intertwined features of academic life which are repeatedly mentioned by the pioneers in this issue. The authors involved are willing to tolerate high levels of risk; have sought out informal (e.g. friends and colleagues with shared interests) and formal support networks (e.g. institutions like the American Marketing Association, Marketing Science Institute; Sheth Foundation; Economic and Social Research Council). In various ways, they have pursued their careers with a singlemindedness that deserves kudos.

Zeithaml, for instance, had an unusual start to her working life given her later academic prominence, but her recounting of it enables us to gain an insight into her drive and determination (see also <https://vimeo.com/199016586>). What most readers probably will not know is that she started work in an advertising agency, progressing up the ranks rapidly from the secretarial duties she was originally hired to perform. Every opportunity that has presented itself, she took. She sought new tasks, additional responsibility, and repeatedly challenged herself, eventually enrolling in an MBA and Ph.D. programme (and managing to publish during the former). With respect to the latter, her workload was immense:

“PhD students did not receive any financial remuneration. To support ourselves, we taught undergraduate courses at the rate of \$1,000 per section. Each semester I *taught* four sections – two of advertising and two of core marketing – in addition to *taking* three doctoral courses”.

Zeithaml's focus permeates everything she has done. Not only did she develop services marketing in fruitful directions, she influenced academic practice more broadly courtesy of her textbook writing. Practitioners have, in turn, benefitted from her consultancy activities and thought leadership. Even though her career has been extremely demanding, it has also

facilitated the cultivation of long friendships. This is probably true of many reading this introductory paper. While we often work in isolation, most of us have peers and mentors who support what we do and how we do it. Layton's paper, unusually, reveals the sometimes very difficult choices he made; choices that distance us from some, whilst enabling connections with others. In his case a decision meant disconnection from close family. As a function of leaving a church which placed heavy demands on its members, "I have seen them only once or twice in the last 50 years", he writes.

Sometimes we might be completely aware of the impact we have made upon other people; at other points, less so. We may even be unaware of the extent to which our paths have crossed during our careers and how our insights, research and publications have supported the advances made by our peers or the next generation of intellectual swashbucklers. Like every contributor to this issue, Layton is generous in signalling his appreciation of those who supported him, encouraged his research, and who made his life more interesting. Wensley, likewise, cites the valuable support he received at various stages in his research lifecycle. Grönroos points to the emotional and intellectual sustenance provided by Evert Gummesson from (pretty much) the start of their respective careers and the links that have united them to the present day.

When we read across Bolton and Zeithaml's respective papers, there was a certain degree of intellectual cross-fertilization, combined with direct and indirect support (see also <https://vimeo.com/198210746>). Both reference the importance of Kent Monroe (prominent for his contributions to pricing research) for their subsequent careers. As the publication of these autobiographies makes very apparent, certain members of our intellectual community serve as key nodes for the advancement of our subject, often doing so in very selfless ways. Their activities can fly under the radar to some extent (e.g. Hal Kassarian).

Monroe's publications were important for Bolton, exposing her to salient insights during her doctoral training; Zeithaml references him as willing to spend "time with me to shape my research". While Zeithaml probably appreciates that she and Bolton have direct connections via a Ph.D. student who became a prominent academic as well as via shared co-authors, what she might not remember or recall is that Bolton's industry employer supported her service research via the Marketing Science Institute in the early 1980s. This company should be doubly thanked. It assisted the development of one pioneer in terms of their research (Zeithaml) whilst providing the other with significant resources, time and an intellectually stimulating climate in which they could develop (Bolton). Bolton, furthermore, articulates her appreciation for Zeithaml's seminal contributions and practical willingness to support female academics.

Some of our authors have been relatively lucky in terms of their career progression. Bolton highlights significant amounts of serendipity in her account; others touch upon "luck" as well. But, when outside observers see "luck" and effortless achievement, they often fail to appreciate the setbacks and difficulties we have had to endure and overcome to assume fortunate positions. This less visible side to academic labour emerges in vivid terms in Grönroos' submission. He is thankful for his success. Even so, it was not an easy ride. He had to negotiate some difficult times; times that required perseverance and self-belief in spades.

Grönroos has displayed more than his fair share of tenacity. With respect to his Ph.D., he was fortunate in having a supervisor who gave him leeway in terms of the focus of his study and

the methodological strategy ultimately deployed. This note of positivity was not echoed by the university community at large. Repeated blows to his self-confidence were deflected. Grönroos even challenged Philip Kotler's interpretation of the status of service marketing. Offering to drive the latter to a seminar, he questioned Kotler's stance, offered his own opinion, illuminated what he was doing, and won him over. Remember, he was a doctoral student at the time. Kotler was at the peak of his powers.

Grönroos' independent streak was buttressed by his network building. Without supportive voices, shouting in the wilderness rapidly becomes tiring. He sought out scholars and practitioners whose views were commensurate with his own and they formed a self-reinforcing community of practice. Interestingly, Grönroos, Bolton and Zeithaml all had significant numbers of practitioners *and* academics in their networks. During their earlier explorations, practitioners and their insights were crucial in helping forward the research agendas these scholars mapped out and helped to develop.

Grönroos, in fact, discussed his earliest attempts at rethinking service marketing with practitioners, that is, before he outlined them to his doctoral supervisor. Industry support and enthusiasm were key in ensuring he pursued a path that was not well trodden. What new scholars – particularly Ph.D. researchers will find valuable – is that Grönroos (like Zeithaml, Bolton and to a lesser extent, Layton) sketches out the philosophy of research that has served him so well over his career. It is not a philosophy that will appeal to all – it does come, as we might anticipate, with risk.

Zeithaml's philosophical, axiological and methodological stance is more conservative in that it is consistent with the mainstream of marketing and consumer research, stressing a mixture of managerial orientation, combined with qualitative and quantitative approaches. We refer to Zeithaml as slightly more conservative than either Grönroos or Bolton for the simple reason that the former equates qualitative with "exploratory" research and denies it the status of proper "empirical analysis". Grönroos is more interpretive and qualitative in orientation, although with a bit of positivistic language creeping into his narrative. Bolton shares Zeithaml's emphasis on managerial research and commitment to rigour and relevance without explicitly marginalizing any methodological leanings. Wensley's research orientation is less developed, reflecting a contingency approach to scholarship. This is not a criticism; merely, a fact of reality.

When our academic practice is overwhelmed by administrative commitments we are more likely to engage in whatever activities fit into the time we have available. Wensley was a heavy-hitting publishing machine, producing two prize-winning *Journal of Marketing* papers in his time. With searing honesty, he admits that his output has suffered because of his non-scholarly commitments. When he was under less time pressure, he tended to pursue managerial research and conduct large scale studies; he devoted himself to slightly more critical research when administrative commitments became pressing; and undertook wholly theoretical reflections on the connections between academic research and practitioner requirements when his role required him to contribute to debates consistent with his stewardship of AIM (the Advanced Institute of Management Research in the United Kingdom).

Reading each of these accounts provides ample food-for-thought for various segments of the university labour market. Senior colleagues might find reassurance that their choices have

enabled them to balance their careers and personal lives in ways they deem more desirable than the frenetic pace demanded of these pioneers. The levels of commitment and the opportunity costs required to reach the top of the publishing tree are considerable. Mid-career academics being pressurized into taking on extensive administrative commitments might want to think about the likely ramifications for their research and career trajectory. Moving institutions may make more sense than acquiescence. Doctoral candidates will glean a considerable amount of useful information about how they can maximize their opportunities for success with regards to their research career. Grönroos' account is exceptionally valuable in this regard.

As he explains, a doctoral thesis is never going to be the best piece of work that is produced by an individual. It is a largely functional document. It shows that a candidate has reached a certain standard; that they can think critically and engage with the literature in productive ways, finessing, refuting and going beyond it, hopefully in new directions that those too embedded in a debate could never have envisaged. Despite our somewhat repetitious refrain, we cannot fail to add that the philosophy of research that Grönroos sketches out entails risk. After all, the neophyte adopting Grönroos' stance will be contesting the views of those who have built careers on certain ways of thinking about and studying a topic. Saying that they have been working in unproductive or less useful ways is always likely to trigger a reaction (see Tadjewski, 2008). But, marketing needs much more of this willingness to challenge received wisdom. Irrespective of the epistemological universalism that underpins too much reflection on marketing theory, we must appreciate that our intellectual constructions are a reflection of the time and place in which they are produced. They are lines in the sand. They will get modified by a rising tide. And this should not only be expected, but is now rewarded publicly.

As Grönroos and Zeithaml point out, our contributions are increasingly measured by systems like Google Scholar. People engaging with our work, even if they are revising, refuting and completely rethinking it have to (normally) cite it. For this we receive our citation desserts. Being cited means that our research is viewed as impactful. Zeithaml, like other pioneers, has witnessed her intellectual outputs being consumed with avidity. Her work has been drawn upon, developed in new directions, and refreshed to take account of changing technologies. Such challenges ensure the ongoing vitality of marketing theory. For Grönroos, we need to inculcate the desire to challenge extant ways of thinking right from the start of enrolment on a doctoral programme.

Grönroos' elucidation of the philosophical perspective that underwrites the "Nordic School" of services marketing is one which has some merit beyond the borders of this domain. We must note that we do not feel especially comfortable with his argument that the philosophical position he offers "is not a dogma". This does not appear correct when he refers to the Nordic School as offering a "unifying way of thinking". When we unify something, we seek to make it uniform. This, perhaps unfortunate use of language, speaks more to homogeneity than the pluralism that Grönroos attempts to support. Generally, though, his argument is sound. He encourages academics to refuse to be hemmed in by the status quo:

"The guideline is to step ahead and confront what you do not agree with, and never be restricted by existing theories, frameworks, models, or concepts, nor by dominant

scientific approaches and methods. When you follow this guideline, there is a fair chance that you will see opportunities, and solutions, no one else has seen before.”

He continues,

“A researcher has to be strong in his or her faith. I always advise students and post-docs to believe in themselves and in what they are doing and to listen to comments, but unless they realise there is a better way to do it, never to let themselves be talked out of what they believe in and out of the methodological approach they consider fit for their study.”

In slightly different ways, then, the themes of risk and tenacity repeatedly appear across the material we include in this special issue. Bolton, to offer another example, moved to the United States to study, leaving her parents behind in Canada. This was one of the best moves she could have made at the time. Bolton ended up at Carnegie Tech. For marketing scholars unfamiliar with this institution, it was cutting edge (see Tadjewski, 2009). She was surrounded by extraordinarily research active, high profile and award-winning scholars from multiple disciplines. The preparation and training she received at the Graduate School of Industrial Administration was superb. Being enveloped by hardworking and visionary academics fosters a desire to push one’s self intellectually. Bolton, clearly, did so. Moreover, she was among a relatively small number of women pursuing a Ph.D. when she graduated (i.e. in the late 1970s). As she reveals, the academic climate reflected and refracted limited gender sensitivity.

In her manuscript, Bolton recalls a somewhat uncomfortable situation which underlined the “systemic” gender imbalances underwriting the job market at an American Marketing Association conference. The meetings that took place were usually located in a hotel room. When you have too many people in a room it becomes difficult to find a seat. As a young woman walking into a room full of senior faculty, some of whom were lying on the bed, it must have been – frankly – weird. Surprisingly, such insensitive (and creepy) practices continued into the 2000s, with Bolton lobbying against them. Things change, but often too slowly.

As Bolton notes, her research approach involved working on large projects and these required substantial time commitments. She was aware that the pay-off could be large, leading to a stream of publications, “but this approach can be risky”. The same can be said of her willingness to shift gears from academia to practice and back again; but her experiences do seem to have created research opportunities. They also provided Bolton with the chance to serve the wider discipline. She was, after all, the first female editor of the *Journal of Marketing*. What should be appreciated is another element of risk that is exposed in her manuscript and not generally acknowledged in print. Being the editor of a journal can be a valuable experience. An academic gets to read a great number and variety of submissions. The downside is the responsibility that accompanies it. Many authors probably do not always register how difficult it is to reject papers. We have never met an editor who enjoys doing so. Bolton’s account helps put this into some context:

“There was a major downside to being JM editor. The acceptance rate was about 10%, so I rejected close to 300 manuscripts each year. Each manuscript usually has multiple co-authors, so I was a messenger of bad news to 600-900 people each year – people

with hopes, dreams and feelings. I don't like it when my papers are rejected; no one does. Some people react badly. Once my editorial assistant confessed to saving one particular individual's many vitriolic emails for the FBI, in case something terrible happened to me!"

To change topic and sound a more positive note, Layton's fascinating and extremely detailed account of his career reveals the extent to which he regularly challenged himself intellectually. While not averse to the managerial agenda and the symbolism of mathematics that accompanied the reorientation of marketing after the Ford and Carnegie reports of the late 1950s (see Tadjewski, 2006), he was nonetheless dissatisfied with the circumscribed boundaries this placed around the subject. As he travelled the world – extensive and prolonged travel being a hallmark of most of the pioneers we have featured in these pages (Tadjewski and Jones, 2017) – Layton looked at the various market structures he encountered, particularly how they were embedded within specific cultural contexts, and started to appreciate that the literature did not reflect the variety and diversity of what he saw in situ. This impacted upon his research. Layton is usually associated with macromarketing (i.e. the area of study that explores the impact of society on marketing and marketing on society) and this requires him to consult a diverse range of literatures, using such material to develop structurally and contextually sensitive accounts of the development of "marketing systems". Looking at the development of core institutions in this way should be viewed as challenging and risky. Challenging in terms of the mass of material he needs to accumulate and digest. Risky in the sense that it involves pursuing less mainstream approaches (with concomitant dangers for career advancement). It has paid off. His functionalist approach has been applauded and used extensively. In addition, he actively promoted a macro-orientation to marketing education in Australia as a result of his prominent administrative roles.

All in all, there are many reasons why we should thank every contributor to this issue. They have forwarded multiple research areas in highly productive ways, often changing the way our discipline is taught at the same time. Their life experiences provide food-for-thought for those just starting their careers or who want to think more clearly about the likely potential foreclosure of opportunities that accompanies certain decisions at mid-career. Finally, they remind us that the academic life is not an easy one. It is demanding, difficult and undermines work-life balance in many cases. But it is endlessly fascinating. And that is one of the reasons it is pursued with such vigour and enthusiasm.

Conclusion

Risk, tenacity and hard work underwrite the papers in this special issue. Success in our discipline is a function of each factor, combined with a little bit of luck. With the right conditions of possibility, the sky is the limit. The contributors to this issue have all managed to successfully negotiate the career paths available to academics and underline some of the problems and issues they confronted and overcame in cleaving space for their research within our thought community. Out of their experience we have illuminated a mixture of distilled insights into the kinds of research philosophy we might adopt; the risks and rewards that accompany them; and how we can all strive to maximize the impact of our research, pedagogy and service on the subject that has or will occupy attention space for a major portion of our lives.

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